

California Governor Gavin Newsom ramps up reopening despite serious public health threats

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California Governor Gavin Newsom announced this week that the state is rapidly moving through his phased reopening plan, after being under lockdown since March 19. As of Tuesday, 47 of 58 counties in the state have been cleared for the third stage of re-opening.

What this means is that in addition to reopened shopping malls and dine-in restaurants, these counties will permit gatherings of up to 100 people, including religious services and protests, and the opening up of hair salons and barber shops.

Newsom has also allowed retailers statewide to resume in-store sales if permitted by their counties. On Wednesday, he held an “economic recovery listening tour” for gym and fitness center owners and made clear that gyms will be cleared to reopen very soon, telling them, “Within a week or so, we believe we’ll be in a position to make public the guidelines in your sector.”

California has total numbers of COVID-19 cases over 100,000 and reported deaths nearing 4,000, a number which experts believe to be severely under-reported. The moves to reopen have provoked serious concerns from public health experts across the board.

Santa Clara Public Health Officer Sara Cody, the author of the state’s first lockdown plan in California’s Bay Area, told the county Board of Supervisors last week that she was seriously concerned about the pace of the modifications: “The state modifications are being made without a real understanding of the consequences of what the last move has been, and with the possible serious effects for health and possible serious risks or an exponential growth in cases.”

Newsom has claimed that his approach to re-opening has been “science-based” and that it reflects the state’s increased capacity for testing and the growth of a workforce of “contact tracers.” The latter, whom Newsom

praised as “disease detectives” in his press conference, are tasked with tracking down those who might have been in contact with infected individuals as a way to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As of now, the governor claims that the state tests nearly 60,000 individuals per day and that it has trained 1,320 new contact tracers (in addition to the existing workforce of 3,000) to help with the pandemic control plan.

The problem, however, is that these measures barely address the tip of the iceberg.

Lee Riley, an infectious disease expert from the University of California, told *Politico* that while testing is essential, that would not provide a way out of the pandemic. Not only were the tests themselves unreliable, “[by] the time you found out somebody tested positive, the transmissions have already occurred in the community.” Riley pointed out that given the two-week incubation period associated with the virus, at the very least, the state government needed to wait a few weeks before moving on to the next phase of re-opening. That, however, is not part of Newsom’s political calculations.

Alameda County, which along with Newsom allowed billionaire Elon Musk to defy the lockdown and reopen the Tesla auto assembly plant, is already seeing an uptick in the number of infections. The county, home to Tesla’s flagship Fremont plant, has seen a 20 percent-plus spike in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases. According to the *LA Times* tracker, Alameda was averaging 58 new infections per day, as against the 48 per day the week before. Even more alarmingly, the highest number of infections (100) per day was last Friday. Such numbers should serve as warnings for other counties that seem to be in a rush to relax shelter-in-place rules.

In addition to dine-in restaurants and barber shops, over a dozen of the state’s 73 casinos have begun opening last

week, with many more pledging to open in the next few weeks. At the Viejas Casino and Resort in San Diego County, overcrowded openings led to hundreds of people queuing for hours around the building. San Diego, Los Angeles, and Sacramento counties have some of the largest concentrations of casinos in the state. The facilities are some of the largest employers in the regions, with workforces in the thousands, they are also gathering centers, particularly for the elderly.

Despite a few words of concern by Newsom over the casino reopening, the state is allowing it, claiming that as sovereign nations, the Native American tribes who run them aren't subject to state or county laws. "It is all a gamble. They're gambling with their guests' lives, with their employees' lives," Tony Wolf, a 33-year-old security guard, told KPBS after he quit his job at Viejas Casino out of health concerns.

Announcing that a full-fledged Phase Three would allow for Disneyland and other theme parks to open as well, Newsom insisted: "Phase 3 is not a year away. It's not six months away. It's not even three months away. It may not even be more than a month away ... We just want to make sure we have a protocol in place to secure customer safety, employee safety and allow the businesses to thrive in a way that is sustainable." Disneyland alone has some 31,000 employees and is the largest of the state's many theme parks, which each have tens of thousands of daily visitors and millions of annual visitors. Any decisions to reopen the theme parks are homicidal, and can only result in an explosion of cases.

Meanwhile, there are at least 4,551 reported cases in the Mexican state of Baja California, California's southern neighbor. Mexico is setting daily records for deaths and new cases, and is now ranked eighth in the world for total cases. So far 11,000 Mexican health workers have tested positive and 149 healthcare workers have died. The economies and populations along the US-Mexico border are intimately tied together, with some one million daily crossings and millions of families who straddle the border.

California is home to 165 billionaires, more than any other state in the United States, and in fact more than most countries in the world. The combined wealth of these 165 individuals exceeds the GDP of all but 24 countries in the world. Three of them—Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg and Larry Ellison—have seen their wealth grow by a combined \$44 billion since mid-March.

On the other end of the spectrum, California is also the state in which over 4.5 million unemployment claims—the

highest number in the country—have been filed since mid-March. Unemployment is believed to be approaching a mind-boggling 25 percent as weekly claims increase. According to recent polls, 20 percent of the state's 40 million residents listed homelessness as their primary concern, made all the more dire with many county eviction moratoriums set to expire in June.

Newsom, along with Democratic and Republican politicians around the country, is using the desperation of millions of unemployed as a battering ram to force the reopening of the economy and further the pursuit of profits. It is significant that in contrast to the full reopening of beaches, public parks, restaurants and church services, attendance at political protests, which often occur outside and in open spaces, is limited to 100. According to the official state government website, such gatherings are "limited to 25 percent of the relevant area's maximum occupancy" and "failure to maintain adequate physical distancing may result in an order to disperse or other enforcement action."

In the wake of the dispatch of the National Guard and the brutal suppression of protests against the police killing of George Floyd—which have spread to Los Angeles—it is clear that Newsom's restrictions on protests will be enforced far more strictly than any other limits on other gatherings, setting the stage for a crackdown on democratic rights. As a new wave of infection begins to unfold with the back-to-work campaign pursued by bipartisan consensus, workers throughout the state and beyond will fight against the gambling of their lives and those of their families and co-workers on the pursuit of profits.



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